

"BEGINNER'S MIND": THE ESSENTIAL PROJECT OF PAYING ATTENTION THROUGH MULTISENSORY DESIGN AND REPRESENTATION

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In his article "On Paying Attention: Flagpoles, Mindfulness, and Teaching Writing" Keith Kroll (2008) observes the seemingly vacant faces of students that pass by him every day not noticing the flags at half-staff, and asks the fundamental question: how do we teach students to pay attention, to "lead lives that are...in the moment" (p.72)? In response, he advocates for the often-disfavored personal essay genre when writing about what they know based on personal experience, students are much more committed to a long-term practice of research and writing. Contemplating a similar question, but with an emphasis on the productivity of academic writers, Robert Boice (2000)—the psychologist and author of the cult-classic *Advice for New Faculty Members: Nihil Nimus (Everything in moderation)*—advocates for regular, brief sessions of writing that can feel fluid and consistent, and unencumbered, even enjoyable. What both of these writers use as the scaffold to their philosophical approach to the creative process is the Zen principle of *shoshin* or "beginner's mind," which refers to cultivating an attitude of openness and curiosity that governs our way of being, of relating to ourselves and to everything else (Suzuki, 1970).

Thinking about what may pose an obstruction for design students from assuming beginner's mind and perpetuate the state of inattentiveness that Kroll laments, I find the problem to unfold in two ways in studio. First, the process of design in the academic setting is governed by a rhythm of binge production and abrupt halts, very often without a careful consideration of the process. Although many conversations revolve around process work, its value still hinges on the outcomes and not necessarily on the nature of the process. Students do not often learn how to "shift gears" and navigate varied speeds of conceptual exploration and synthetic assembly and critical development.

Secondly, vision as one of the senses, and the visual mode of representation, dominate our architectural production and education at the expense of the other means of experiencing of space. Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore (1977), in their book titled *Body, Memory, and Architecture* remind us that the senses are not autonomous modes of input but constitute a complex, networked system of perception. Within this system, vision works with, and essentially relies on the other parts of the sensory system (tactile, haptic, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory) to map out a cohesive experience of an environment. As a result of the "visualistic" approach to architecture, its representation has also been preoccupied with a singular pursuit, particularly of photorealism and the abstraction of surface and form. While this has origins in the Renaissance investigation of perspectival space, recent technologies have privileged the visual to a point of utter exhaustion. The image-based product embellishes the visual world, as a mindset, it disregards the other senses and treats the material world through its visual "shorthand." As a result, students are more preoccupied with how brushed concrete appears at a cursory look than its intricate texture against the hand or how cool it feels under the feet or how hollow it may sound. The nature of the problem is cyclical. Architecture students are not fluent with the language of nonvisual representation and therefore focus only harder on the visual, largely missing the gamut of visceral—and slower, broader, deeper—experiences their designs might engender.

To intervene within this “automatic cycle” and in the spirit of beginner’s mind principle that might manifest itself by paying attention in a way unfiltered through preconceptions, I asked the students to abandon their most used facilities and adopt new modes of observation. The following discussion portrays the process through which a group of fifteen students with completely intact vision grappled with the unsighted experience of architecture and the world.

COMMUNITY CENTER FOR THE BLIND AND VISION-IMPAIRED

The project discussed in this paper was given as part of the Capstone Studio, the culminating installment of Temple University’s undergraduate Architecture curriculum. The agenda for the Capstone studio can be tailored by the studio professor in line with their research and professional work, but the overarching objective is to foster independent thinking reinforced by a critical practice of making. Although this is the sixth architectural design studio the students take and is, in a sense, the “finale” of their design education, I took it as an opportunity to challenge them to become *beginners* again.

The project brief is the design a community center for the vision-impaired in the Manayunk neighborhood of Philadelphia. The site is on Venice Island along the Schuylkill River, a former site of a mill, at the foot of a steep hill and along a towpath connected to the city’s extensive park system. In the region, there are a few existing such centers for individuals with visual impairments, but all are located outside of the city, so the project site offers an urban location that is connected to public transportation and other amenities. The program includes some required components such as common lounge, recreation room, technology and learning center, community kitchen, and short-term residences, but the students are invited to re-think the distribution and specific character of the facility depending on their unique treatment of the design problem.

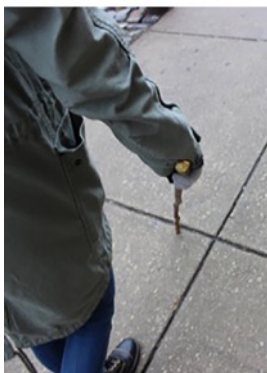


Figure 1 Chang (Jazzmynn) Hong on site visit

I approached the course schedule privileging the students’ design process, as opposed to the outcomes of certain phases. The reasoning behind this shift was based on the argument that exploratory research, synthetic assembly, and development phases existed in a continuum, not dominated by abrupt breaks and binges imposed by deadlines. With that in mind, I devised exercises and other activities to create a rhythm of work oscillating between slower phases of reflection or prospective attention, regular pauses that ensured mental and physical breaks, and faster periods for quick tests and immersive experiences. In the sections ahead, I would like to share few examples representative of each of these phases, not following the chronological order in which they occurred throughout the semester but framed within their respective temporal qualities: *slow down*, *fast forward*, *pause* and *rewind*.

SLOW DOWN

Counterintuitive to what most consider a highly-valued skill, taking longer time and building a certain level of inefficiency in the exploratory phase of the design research was an intentional strategy to have the students define their own stake in the project. Furthermore, it was a way of building a kind of empathy with the potential users that could in turn feed their decision-making process. In essence, the slowness of the research phase ensured a regular momentum through the subsequent phases.

Working in groups of three or four, all students were asked to take turns as documenters and subjects, blindfolded. Groups returned to the site on numerous occasions at different times of the day in order to gather information that captured the diurnal patterns of their findings.

Unlike typical site visits that may entail taking as many photographs as possible, dimensional surveys, and preemptive Google Earth documentation, the “slow motion site visit” asked the students to linger and explore their surroundings in a very unfamiliar (possibly uncomfortable) fashion.

A second strategy to introduce some friction to the students’ process and create opportunities to pay more attention to what would otherwise be glossed over, was to assign brief exercises that focused on media explorations. Preliminary readings and lectures framed the sensory perception as a function of a complex network of data and system of organs, revisiting concepts such as haptics, proprioception, balance, etc, and the specific exercises asked students to focus on one type of input such as olfactory, tactile, and gustatory data, and represent the findings in ways that hybridized digital and analog, static and interactive. Using Kate McLean’s (2015) design research on human perception of the urban “smellscape” as a departure point, my students collected data in groups and proposed ways of recreating specific facets of the sensory experience in a controlled environment on campus.



Figure 2 Students testing various components of the “smellscape” analysis

One site survey group proposed a collection of “smell jars” that captured the unique olfactory cues spotted along the main commercial strip in Manayunk and paired the smell with the tactile qualities it evoked—sticky, prickly, slippery...—to reveal the reciprocity that the sense of smell and touch exhibit. Students assigned certain pairings, which then their peers assessed via interactive installations.

I imagined another approach to slowing down as a collective effort, both on the part of the author and the audience. In order to engage with the proposed projects in real-time and to enhance their sensory effect, the students crafted multimedia representations that we called “sensory vignettes,” combining conventional modes of architectural representation with time-based media. As an example of how students created their own interpretations of a “sensory vignette,” Nick Fontana, who proposed a smell and sound garden for the community center, presented an animated sequence in which perspectival views and sound clips overlaid on the plan drawing changed as the red dot representing the body in motion navigated through the garden.

FAST FORWARD

Boice (2000), in *Nihil Nimus*, advises writers to start the process even before feeling “ready” and to be quick but not to rush. In the studio, I integrated such swift starts in a couple of different ways. Contrary to the conventional notion that digital tools expedite the design and execution process, in this studio, we turned to analog means for quick conceptual prototypes and, as a result, to build momentum. In this case, the intentional speed was not a detriment to paying attention, but it in fact allowed the students to hone in on certain aspects of the project with purpose, without the mediation that digital technology imposes and can at times feel cumbersome.

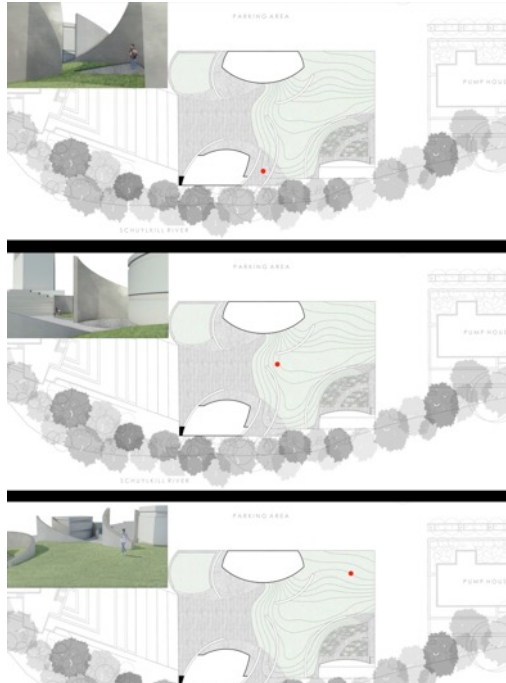


Figure 3 Stills from Nick Fontana's "sensory vignette" animation

In conversations over the course of the semester, I encouraged the students to sketch in drawing and model forms continuously, but at certain intervals they were in fact required to integrate analog "layers" or attributes to their work and produce hybrid representations. Results included charcoal or watercolor studies and material studies used in conjunction with digital renderings, animated "walk-throughs."

We also employed an analog strategy for group presentations. Students were asked to create interactive installations to test certain moments in their projects and to actively engage with the physical results of their proposals, but also to get each other's immediate feedback. In this sense, an approach akin to "throw-away prototyping" was used, where students mocked up certain conditions that examined thresholds, material transitions, navigation systems, etc.

PAUSE

What may seem at first like a paradoxical idea is one of the primary tenets of Boice's (2000) advice: *not* writing, or "active waiting," establishes a crucial basis for a healthy and regular practice of writing. He decidedly differentiates this pause from procrastination; in fact, Boice suggests the pre-action phase as an antidote to the predicament toward procrastination. Considering this strategy within the context of the design studio, I identified some tactics to draw the students out of studio and away from the intensity of their individual preoccupations, which in turn help their design process immensely.



Figure 4 Students in "Vision thru Art" class

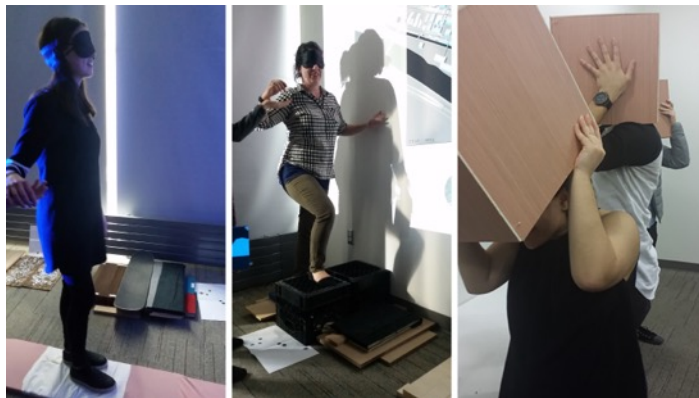


Figure 5 Students interacting with prototypical installations

One such pause to the studio work occurred with a physical break, an excursion to a ceramics class called "Vision thru Art," offered specifically for individuals with impaired vision at a community arts school in northwest

Philadelphia. Prior to the trip, I refrained from asking my students to do any advance preparation, although some of them took advantage of the time together with their potential "users" and had very

directed conversations. Others played with clay and assisted the ceramics students with various tasks. Since there was no formal “outcome” expected from this visit, students were able to simply experience a facet of the vision-impaired individuals’ life in a context where they are mostly independent, active, productive and happy.

Another pause from the studio work occurred when we hosted an individual with vision-impairment, Ed, at the school. Based on some preliminary research on the urban experience of a blind person, students were able to ask very specific questions to Ed to reinforce, refine or dispel any preconceptions. The conversations with Ed yielded some important discoveries about how a young person who has a full-time job navigates the city, maintains an active social life, cooks for himself, but also more finer details relative to architectural design like how he navigates long hallways or locate doorways. Students used their notes from this interview and the footage from Ed’s visit in many of their presentations to ground their arguments at the human scale and in personal ways.

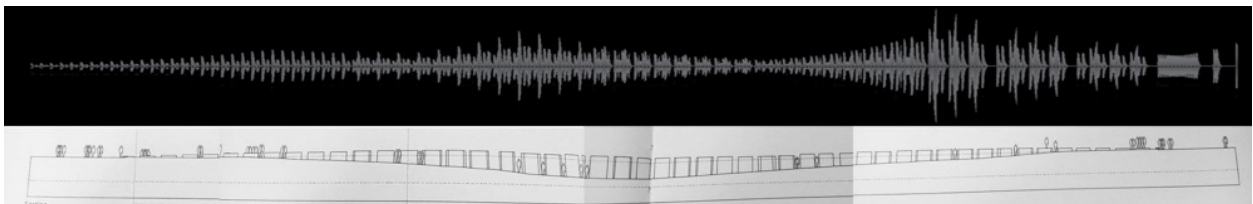


Figure 6 Orilla Lin's experiments with stitch patterns and sound

REWIND

Reflecting back on the process was integrated into the semester at regular intervals, via multiple modalities. In the beginning of the semester, I asked the students to write a paragraph-long text describing their architectural idea and to revisit it every two weeks. Earlier in the semester this served two purposes: one, for me and the cohort to get to know each other through their written expression of ideas, two for the students to “record” their intentions during a time of visceral exploration and non-abstract studies. Later in the semester, as the students continued to revise the paragraph and share it publicly with the rest of the group, the text became a vehicle for the students to “rewind” their trajectory over the past few weeks and assess it against their original intentions. Periodically revisiting the text built in a ritual of slow reflection, an attitude of care and an awareness of reciprocity between the artifacts they made and the words they used to frame their ideas. When they looked back, certain ideas or words to which they felt a certain attachment, seemed inconsequential in the project or, conversely, in retrospect they were able to identify areas where they had veered away from the primary direction of their project. At certain intervals during the semester, particularly during formal reviews when we had guest critics, students prefaced their presentations with the text and intertwined it with key visuals to direct the audience’s attention. In a way, the exercise that allowed them to pay close attention to their work became an instrument for them to focus the audience’s attention as well.

Another way I asked the students to revisit their decisions and process (to rewind and replay) was in the form of a precedent study where individuals chose a canonical work of architecture for multisensory analysis. Studying a very familiar, even iconic, building through an unconventional filter, one that allowed for atmospheric qualities and subjective interpretation, helped encourage students to make discoveries in very well-trodden lands. The exercise required that they employ translations between media and the different senses. One student, Orilla Lin, mapped the haptic qualities of Eisenman Architects' Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe both as a series of stitch patterns on fabric as well as a soundscape interpretation. In another example, Julie Kress studied Toyo Ito's Tama Art University Library and created a projection onto relief models that depicted the mass-less, fluid qualities of space.

CONCLUSION

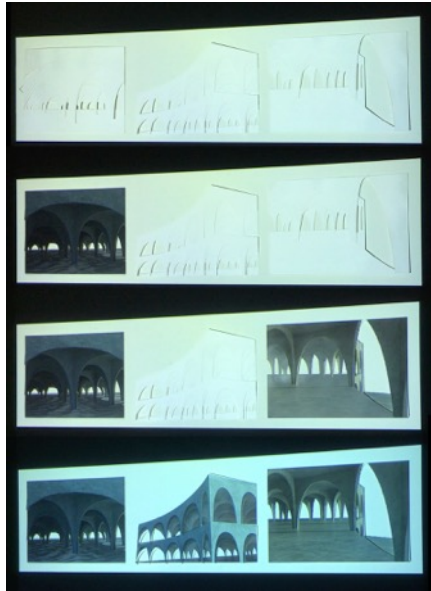


Figure 7 Stills from Julie Kress' interpretive animation

Framed as an architectural problem—to design for the multisensory experience, particularly an unsighted one—the pedagogical project, at its core, investigated teaching how to pay attention. While there were a series of very interesting discoveries in terms of architectural representation gained by the de-emphasis on the visual and more deliberation on the other facets of the sensory experience, the primary “lesson” demonstrated the transformative nature of mindful approaches throughout the design process.

As the students turned their attention inward, the reflective time enabled them to own every aspect of their work, become more confident in their strengths and aware of their shortcomings. But, even more importantly, students became more in tune with their own process. In contrast, as the students turned their attention outward to the everyday experience of others—the collective and individual lives of a community of vision-impaired people in Philadelphia—the experience imbued the term “user” with real meaning, engendering empathy, perhaps even a sense of interconnectedness.

What initially seemed like a “loss”—lack of vision—transformed the challenge into a slower investigation of the body's full experience of the environment and, in turn, yielded a much more enriched process. The students adopted the beginner's mind rigorously and shifted their attention as they refined their intentions. As a result, the design process became more sustainable and less reliant on periods of binge production. Projects are not objects of desire but results of empathetic research, incremental discovery, and thoughtful development.

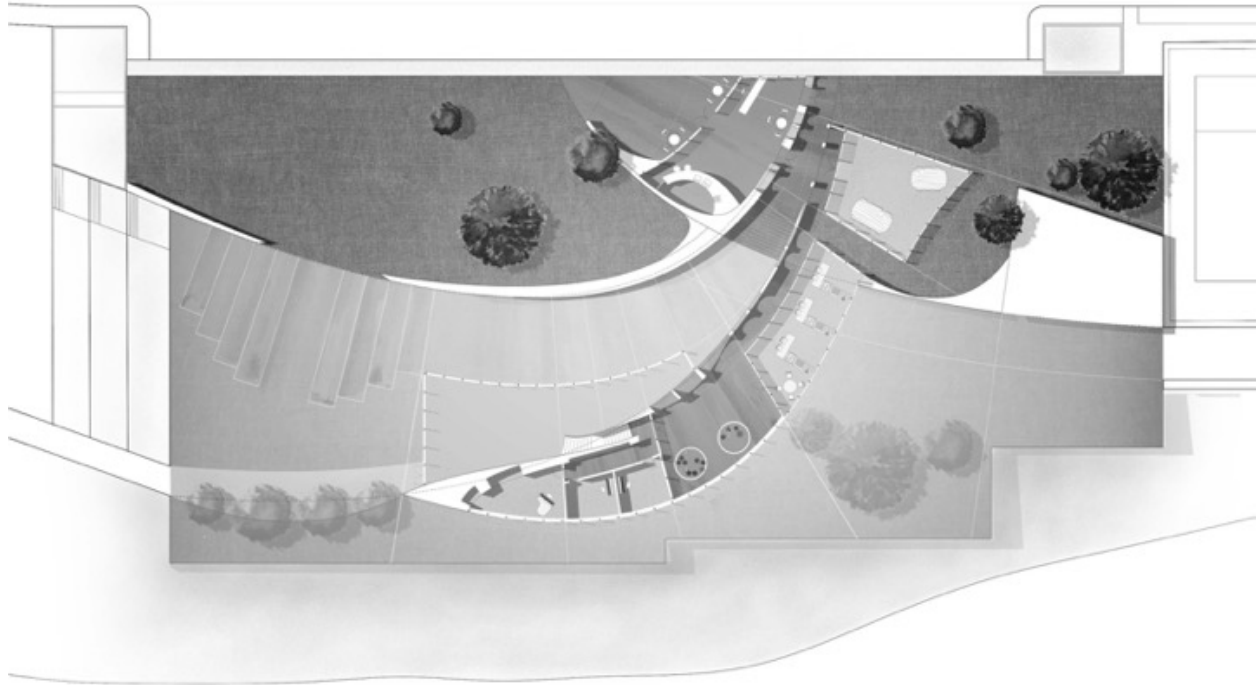


Figure 8 Ground floor plan of Julie Kress' architectural proposal

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